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New Vietnam Dilemma

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IN THE NATION

Unless Dr. Henry Kissinger can bring back from Saigon better news about Vietnamization than the published reports suggest, the latest Vietcong proposals appear to have put President Nixon in an excruciating dilemma.

If so, it will be to no small extent his own doom. In fact, a good many other knowledgeable Americans have welcomed the Vietcong offer to release the prisoners of war if the United States removes its troops by the end of this year. As Mr. Nixon's former Ambassador to the United Nations, Charles W. Yost, pointed out on this page yesterday, that kind of arrangement would both extricate the United States from the shooting war and make the Saigon regime face the necessity either to fight alone or negotiate a settlement with the Vietcong.

But there is nothing in the record to suggest that that is what Mr. Nixon wants right now. Indeed, the rationale of the Vietnamization program, through which the war has been carried on for the last two and a half years, is to give the Saigon Government "a chance" to survive. And the evidence suggests that Mr. Nixon's primary objective is to keep that Government in power at least until after the 1972 American elections and for long enough after the substantial departure of American forces so that the Nixon Administration cannot be charged with having "lost" South Vietnam to Communism—or having lost a war.

To help sustain this policy among war-weary Americans, Mr. Nixon has insisted (a) that he is fighting for a "generation of peace" that would be endangered if he pulled out of Vietnam too soon, and (b) that setting a date for withdrawal would ruin the prospects for the return of the prisoners of war.

But the publication of the Pentagon Papers has undermined the "generation of peace" theme, since it is now confirmed that the United States played a direct role in bringing on the war by undercutting the Geneva Accords of 1954, and since even the C.I.A. is shown to repudiate the "domino theory" as a justification for the war.

Almost simultaneously, the Vietcong offer has destroyed Mr. Nixon's P.O.W. thesis, since it is clear that if the Administration really wants to get the prisoners back, that could be accomplished quickly by withdrawal.

Thus, Mr. Nixon's own past arguments will make it exceptionally difficult for him to turn down the Vietcong offer—at least, the prisoners-for-withdrawal exchange—and retain domestic political belief in the necessity for his phased withdrawal program. But he will no doubt find a way to do so, because to accept the proposal would damage his own game plan.

To agree to total American withdrawal by the end of this year would probably be a political disaster for President Thieu, who must himself win re-election in the fall. It is well known that Mr. Thieu's biggest political asset is the belief in South Vietnam that the American establishment there supports him and his policy of carrying on the war, so that it is difficult to mount a strong opposition against him. Setting a firm withdrawal date before Mr. Thieu's re-election would surely be interpreted in South Vietnam as an American repudiation of the Thieu regime and its hard-line policy. What political upheaval that might produce in Saigon no doubt causes recurring nightmares in the White House.

Moreover, if Mr. Nixon agreed to total withdrawal by the end of the year, or any other date, he would sacrifice even the possibility of a "Korean solution"—keeping an American force in South Vietnam to guarantee a non-Communist regime. The President wants to maintain at least the possibility of such a solution, to improve his and Mr. Thieu's bargaining position in any negotiation for a political settlement.

Recent battlefield developments also suggest that Vietnamization of the war is by no means a fact. Despite the Cambodian and Laotian invasions, the vastly expanded air war, the costly training programs and equipment deliveries, and the continuing American involvement, South Vietnam's ability to defend itself with its American-style million-man army—road-bound, sluggish, poorly led, and fire power-dependent—obviously does not much impress the Vietcong, Hanoi or, one suspects, Washington.

These are strong reasons for rejecting or obfuscating the Vietcong proposals, if Mr. Nixon is resolved at all costs to sustain the Thieu regime, either to the theoretical point where it may be able to defend itself, or to the practical point that he thinks will serve his domestic political purposes. But in that case it will be harder to persuade the American people, sick as they are of the misbegotten mess in Southeast Asia, that the President really wants a negotiated political settlement, the early return of the prisoners, or a total American disengagement.